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SUBJECT: MAY 4 STRIKE FIZZLES

REF: A. CAIRO 783
[B.](#) CAIRO 862

Sensitive but unclassified. Not for internet distribution.

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary: The general strike called for May 4 to protest rocketing inflation and low wages was largely a non-event. Activists from Kefaya ("The Egyptian Movement for Change") and virtual oppositionists using the social networking site Facebook called for the strike (scheduled purposefully on President Mubarak's eightieth birthday) as a follow on to an April 6 strike, which resulted in noticeably quieting Cairo's busy streets, and coincided with riots in the Nile Delta milltown of Mahalla (reftels). While a Facebook group calling for the May 4 strike attracted almost 75,000 members, the virtual activists were not able this time to translate their online rhetoric into a real-world work stoppage. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) May 4 was a normal day in Cairo, albeit with a noticeably heightened security presence throughout the city. The independent media reported on small-scale protests in front of the Lawyer's Syndicate, and the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) website claimed that absenteeism reached eighty-percent at Al Azhar University's theological colleges (we are unable to verify this figure). There were also press reports of small protests of Nasserite party-affiliated students at Assiut University, in southern Egypt. Mahalla, scene of violent rioting on April 6 and 7, was an "armed camp" on May 4, according to the independent press and bloggers, with GOE security forces patrolling in large numbers to ensure a scheduled "silent protest" did not occur.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) The MB, which had previously announced it would participate in the May 4 strike, quickly declared the strike "a success even before it started." MB Deputy Supreme Guide Mohamed Habib, noting President Mubarak's April 30 announcement of a thirty percent raise in public sector salaries, progress in shortening bread lines, and the release of several detainees directly prior to the strike, said that, "The strike has achieved some of its desired objectives, despite the limited public participation." Habib also alleged, "But for the MB's endorsement of the strike, the executive would never have hastened to take these measures." One secular civil society activist speculated to us that the MB's support for the strike may have actually reduced participation, as many more liberal potential strikers feared the MB would take the credit for a large-scale event. A statement posted by the administrators of the strike's Facebook website claimed that the strike was successful: "The strike succeeded because we achieved our main goal - to inform ordinary citizens of their rights."

[¶4.](#) (SBU) Comment: The calculated timing of Mubarak's announcement of the salary increase (originally planned for May 5, but subsequently changed to April 30, once the May 4 strike was announced), and the government's clear willingness

to arrest online activists (as occurred to several supporters of the April 6 strike), drained the oxygen from the May 4 endeavor. The GOE's well-practiced carrot and stick tactics seem to have derailed Facebook's budding political activism, at least for the time being. However, with bread prices still on the rise, and gas and cigarette prices set to increase substantially in order to finance the thirty percent government pay raise, simmering public anger at the government is not likely to ease.

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